

## **Postmodernist Elements in Mao's Thoughts**

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### **Abstract:**

While “Marxian,” Mao’s thought came from a wide variety of sources, notably from his cultural roots and from his life-long study of classical Chinese philosophy, which in many aspects registers a striking affinity with the postmodernist movement of the West in the late 20th century. Mao’s Chinese Marxism can be interpreted as a break-away from traditional Marxism, a political-economic-philosophical metanarrative, which is culturally Eurocentric and epistemologically logocentric—formulated along the line of rationalistic thinking that can be traced back through the Enlightenment all the way to Plato’s idealism.

Postmodernism “abandons absolute standards, universal categories, and grand theories in favor of local, contextualized, and pragmatic conceptual strategies” (Seidman, 1994: 207). This article has no intention to declare Mao as a complete postmodernist, but the obvious would have to be pointed out: i.e., Mao’s notion of integrating Marxism into the specific situation of China is clearly in favor of what Seidman has called “local, contextualized, and pragmatic conceptual strategies,” which explains why the Chinese revolution, essentially an agrarian revolution, led by him had turned out to be a success story.

This article will be centering around two basic themes: one is to trace Mao’s thought to ancient Chinese philosophy, which differs radically from its Western counterpart but contains ideas and thoughts strongly echoed by postmodernist thinkers in the West; the other is to look closely at some of the key concepts in Mao’s philosophy in connection with postmodernism, along with his strong anti-metaphysical stance, to explore how it was possible for him to create conceptual leeway for launching his own philosophical, and political, break-through.

**Key words:** Mao, Modernism, Postmodernism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism, as a philosophical concept, was first introduced in China by Fredric R. Jameson in 1985, when he was lecturing on “postmodernism” and “cultural theory” at Peking University (Wang 2008). Arguably the most influential postmodern theorist in America, Jameson is also “an admirer of Mao Zedong” (*DiscovertheNetwork.org*). According to Wang, Jameson delivered “a shock” to his audience when he suggested that “the Chinese should reread Mao,” as China then, if my memory serves me well, had just been undergoing a campaign of “Complete Rejection of the Cultural Revolution.”

Apparently, the reader can sense a chronological incongruity: Mao passed away in 1976, nine years before postmodernism was first introduced in the Chinese soil. So, in theory, Mao should have no connections, whatsoever, with postmodernism, a late 20th-century movement of philosophy happening in the Western world. Plus, Mao himself had never mentioned “postmodernism” in his works and speeches. However, this is not to say that thinkers of different cultures and geographical regions, and of different historical periods, cannot reach similar conclusions when addressing what is commonly known as the “human condition.” For example, Confucius’ “己所不欲，勿施于人” (Don’t do things to others that you don’t want done to yourself) is echoed, almost identically, in the Christian *Bible*, and Protagoras’ (490-420 BC) paradox rings very similar to the “either/or” theory (两可论) of Deng Xi<sup>1</sup> (邓析, 545-501BC), a Chinese philosopher of the Spring and Autumn Period.

Back in 2013, when I met Professor Thomas Lutze, an American historian, at a conference in China, he immediately spoke of his interest in Zhuangzi (庄子), a prominent figure in classical Chinese philosophy, saying he felt strongly about Zhuangzi being a “postmodernist” because of a “relativistic” spirit in his worldview. Lutze is by no means alone. Gier (2000), author of *Spiritual Titanism: Indian, Chinese, and Western Perspectives*, also names Zhuangzi a postmodernist philosopher, along with Confucius (孔子) and Xunzi (荀子). In his book, Gier reiterates a view held by other Western scholars that Zhuangzi is “the ancient Chinese equivalent of Jacques Derrida,” because both of them share the postmodern traits of “skepticism, relativism, and extreme distrust of language” (215). The story about Zhuangzi seems to suggest that the appreciation of postmodern philosophy should not be based entirely in Western settings around the 20th century—even by Western standards.

To say that Mao is connected to postmodernism does not appear to be out of thin air, as Mao’s influence on the French ideologist Louis Althusser and other Western postmodernists is well documented. Apart from the above mentioned Althusser and Jameson, Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, and many others were also, or at least for a time, among the “die-hard” fans of Mao. Sartre was often seen on the streets distributing “banned Maoist papers” during the 1960’s

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<sup>1</sup> Deng Xi’s statement that “yes can be seen as no and no as yes” is very similar to Protagoras’ fragment on paradox: every issue has two opposing *logoi* (arguments), both of which are feasible.

(Mongaya 2012). Foucault was reported to be involved with a prisoner advocacy network named GIP (*Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons*), which provided support to the jailed Maoists. Because of his involvement with the GIP, Foucault later “adopted the Maoist method of work of social investigation to gather information on French prison conditions” (*ibid.*).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the philosophical connection between Mao and postmodernism. Due to the enormity of the task, I would like to focus on two basic themes: one is to trace Mao's thoughts and methods of thinking to ancient Chinese philosophy, which differs radically from its Western counterpart but contains ideas and thoughts strongly echoed by postmodernist thinkers in the West; the other is to show Mao's postmodern affinity by looking closely at some of the important concepts in his philosophy.

But then what is postmodernism?

## 2. POSTMODERNISM AND CLASSICAL CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

Postmodernism is a slippery term, defying simple definitions. The general consensus is that it has grown out of modernism, but to the point of turning against the latter, especially epistemology wise. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines it as a late 20th century movement in Western philosophy “characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition*). The Chinese readers may not immediately connect “skepticism,” “subjectivism,” and “relativism” or “suspicion of reason” with Mao's thoughts, but the “acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power” should certainly remind them of Mao's consistent emphasis on ideology over economy or other work, as exemplified in some of his well-known slogans, like “politics in command,” “grasp revolution; promote production,” etc.

To return to the question on postmodernism, the major difference between modernism and postmodernism, in my view, lies in their approaches to knowledge and reality. Modernism takes a foundational approach, assuming that there is such a thing as absolute or universal, which is also accessible to individuals through the very means of reason. Postmodernism, on the other hand, takes a non-foundational approach, insisting that there is no such thing as absolute or independently existing. Even if the absolute does exist, a postmodernist would argue, it will be beyond us, simply because of the finite nature of human experience. To complicate the situation, there is no reliable way to speak about the world as it is, for the human subjectivity invariably participates in, and mingles with, our attempts to understand and describe the world. Hence, postmodernists are skeptical of any kinds of claim on Truth.

However, postmodernists do acknowledge and even accept “small” truths: that is, truths as local, situated in time and space, truths as entities socially and linguistically constructed, and, in short, truths as relative and non-foundational. The term “relative” suggests that truths as such

are essentially contextualized, culturally, historically, politically, or economically, existing only in relation to something else rather than standing by itself—alone. This sort of relativist approach to truth is reminiscent of early Chinese philosophy (for example, of the *Yin-Yang* interactive model), which predominantly engages in correlative thinking, instead of analytical, to tackle the problematics of reality. Chinese correlative thinking, points out Graham (1992), among others, differs drastically from Western analytical thinking in that it stresses “complementary polarities” instead of “conflicting opposites (truth/falsehood, good/evil),” the latter typically seen in Western conceptual schemes (64).

Western thinking not only imposes directly contradictory oppositions but also has the tendency to position one end of the polarity as independent of the other. The West, says Graham, “habitually treat[s] A as ‘transcendent’ in the sense that A is conceivable without B but not B without A; for Westerners there could be God without world, reality without appearance, good without evil” (1992: 65). To the contrary, the Chinese scheme treats A and B as “interdependent with A only relatively superior, and the chain does not lead to ‘good/evil’” (64): A exists because of B, and *yin* exists because of *yang*, or vice versa. As an aside note, readers may be struck by a “correlative” tone in Mao when reading his essay “On Contradiction,” in which the author cautions against “seeing the part but not the whole, seeing the trees but not the forest” (*Collected Writings* 63). Clearly, Mao is stressing the need to comprehend the part and the whole as mutually interdependent.

Correlative thinking, I would like to add, is much like relativistic thinking for the reason that under such thinking things are seen as relative to (the opposite) others, examples of which can be seen in the *Zhuangzi* among other Chinese classics: “When there is life, there is death, and when there is death, there is life. When there is possibility, there is impossibility, and when there is impossibility, there is possibility. Because there is right, there is wrong. Because there is wrong, there is right” (*qi-wu lun*).<sup>2</sup>

Any student familiar with early Chinese thought could not help but notice the notion of *ming-shi* (名实), translated in English as “name and object” or “name and actuality.” It embraces a correlative relationship, a “special bond that exists between names and actualities” (Makeham 1994: 145): names exist because there are actualities to be designated by them; on the other hand, actualities cannot exist, or at least in a meaningful way to the human mind, without proper names assigned to them. However, between names and actualities, observes Makeham, early Chinese philosophers, with a few exceptions, pay much more attention to the former because, for them, knowledge of the world, as the author explains, following Feng Youlan, “begins with knowledge of names” (52). Actually we can see this very clearly by reading Lao Zi: “The name is the mother of ten thousand things” (*Tao-Te Ching* 1). But what is significant

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<sup>2</sup> English translation quoted from *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* by Feng Youlan. The original in Chinese: “方生方死, 方死方生。方可方不可, 方不可方可。因是因非, 因非因是 (齐物论).”

here is the recognition in early Chinese thought of reality as a linguistic construction, of which Western postmodernists are keenly aware (Hicks 2004: 6), albeit 2000 years later.

The idea of *ming-shi* tells of an attitude towards language quite different from that of the Greco-Roman tradition, which treats language as “an enterprise to represent or depict or describe an external reality independent of man and society” (Lenk 1993: 6). In the Chinese tradition, however, language functions primarily as an epistemological system, which is to make distinctions of the world perceived to be filled with correlated entities (everything relates to everything else), as seen in the model of *yin-yang* duality, rather than to express certainty about a transcendent truth as advocated by Plato and other Western thinkers. For a Westerner, language and reality can be separable, but to the Chinese, language and reality are one, in the sense that humans have to resort to language to make distinctions between *yin* and *yang*, good and bad, right and wrong, etc. In other words, the signifier is also the signified.<sup>3</sup>

This may explain why early Chinese thinkers are so obsessed with *zheng-ming* (正名), or rectification of names, as seen, for example, in the doctrines of Confucius and his follower Xunzi. Obviously, in their mind is the constructionist role of language in shaping and even creating reality of the world. However, a closer look at Confucius’ statement on “correct naming”<sup>4</sup> may reveal to the reader that the Great Master is also concerned about “the socio-political role that *ming* is perceived to play,” understanding that language “can and should be used to prescribe *shi*” (Makeham xv). Inherent in language is its “regulative function” in shaping “people’s attitudes and inclinations to act” (Hansen 1983: 59); therefore, Confucius’ insistence on the rectification of names can be seen as an effort to rectify people’s moral conduct. A discerning reader may sense a denial of human agency in the statement on “correct naming,” as the Great Master is devoting more of his attention to the “names” than to the humans for his *li* (礼) restoration project. Put another way, language weighs more in the Confucian moral system than the very person who speaks the language. For that reason, Confucius can be categorized as a “poststructuralist”<sup>5</sup> in today’s terms.

Again, we can see a close affinity between postmodernism and ancient Chinese thought when it comes to comprehending language and other related topics philosophically. This is especially true with Michel Foucault, who has written quite extensively on language, knowledge, reality, truth, power, etc. Noticeably, Foucault frequently uses the term “discourse” in his work, instead of “language,” the reason, I believe, being that the former means more than language for the author. Indeed, for Foucault, discourse is a social practice, “a form of action, and not a

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<sup>3</sup> That the signifier is the signified is a noted proposition by postmodernists, like Derrida and Foucault, but it was already contained long ago in classical Chinese philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> The full statement: “If names are not rectified, speech is not appropriate. If speech is not appropriate, then affairs are not completed. If affairs are not completed, then ritual and music do not flourish. If ritual and music do not flourish, then punishments and penalties do not hit the mark. If punishments and penalties do not hit the mark, then the people have nothing to occupy their hands and feet” (名正则言不顺, 言不顺则事不成, 事不成则礼乐不兴, 礼乐不兴则刑罚不中, 刑罚不中则民无所措手足).

<sup>5</sup> One of the important characteristics of poststructuralism is its denial of human agency.

reflection of the world” (Bizzell and Hertzberg 1990: 1126). We can see this clearly in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), in which he argues that “to speak is to do something—something other than to express what one thinks” (209). Earlier, in the book, he states that discourses, as practices, not groups of signs, “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (49), which is reminiscent of the Daoist claim that language is “the mother of then thousand things” (*Tao Te Ching* 1).

That Foucault equals discourse with “a practice” is comparable to the notion of *ming-shi* in ancient Chinese philosophy, which recognizes the active role of language in constructing “actuality,” as discussed earlier. And Foucault also shows a sort of “Confucian” insight when he speaks of discourse as institutionalized practices of representation (i.e., naming) assuming its disciplinary or normative power over the speaking subjects with “an obscure set of anonymous rules” (210). The disciplinary or prescriptive power of discourse, or “the discursive control,” as termed by Foucault, “binds individuals to certain types of enunciation and consequently forbids them all others” (1990: 1162–63), which the author exposes in his work as a modern-day norm, but which Confucius would strive to realize for his project of “rectification names.” To rectify for Confucius is indeed to “discipline” for Foucault, that is, to normalize people’s conduct into “their universally recognized behaviour” through enforcing conformity “to the same model [so that] they might all be like one another” (1995: 181–82).

Since this paper is about postmodernism in Mao’s thoughts, I would like to refrain from dwelling further on the philosophical “tie” between Western postmodernism and ancient Chinese thought. But I wish my point is established here, namely, that classical Chinese philosophy is in many ways already “postmodern,” a point that will help put into context a possible discussion of Mao’s thoughts in light of postmodernism. It should not come as a surprise if we “discover” anything postmodern in Mao, who, we all know, has drawn heavily on ancient Chinese wisdom to develop and advance his philosophical theories.

### 3. MAO AND CLASSICAL CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

Mao’s thought, while traditionally categorized along the line of Marxism and Leninism, is widely acknowledged in scholarship to have originated from sources way beyond Marxism and Leninism. As Roland Lew (1975) points out, “As the son of peasants, formed first by Chinese and then Westernizing ideas, a Marxist cadre in a proletarian party, dealing exclusively with the peasantry but doing so in the name of the proletariat, Mao bears with him a complex ‘view of the world’ that must be resultant of these varied influences” (135). Without a doubt, one of the “varied influences” mentioned by Lew is of that ancient Chinese philosophy, as evident from the fact that Mao has made frequent references to, or used quotations from, early Chinese thinkers and their philosophical ideas in his works. For example, Mao’s famous statement that

“bad things can turn into good things, good things into bad” is apparently a recitation of Lao Zi’s *Dao De Jing*.<sup>6</sup>

Vesvolod Holubnychy noticed, in 1964, that of all the references and quotations used by Mao in his *Selected Works* (4 vols.), Confucian and Neo-Confucian writings take 22%; Daoist and Moist writings take 12%; and Chinese folklore legends and literature take 13% while sources of Marx and Engels, Lenin, and Stalin take 4%, 18%, and 24%, respectively (16). Holubnychy concluded that “Mao was primarily a student of the ancient Chinese books, on the one hand, and of the writings of Lenin and Stalin, on the other, while his readings in Marx and Engels seem to play a comparatively lesser role in his self-education” (17). The author cited Mao’s autobiography “dictated to Edward Snow” back in 1936 (*ibid.*) to support his conclusion. In that autobiography, Mao admitted to—though not directly—his relatively limited exposure to Marxist literature. Whether or not the reader would agree with Holubnychy’s conclusion,<sup>7</sup> at least we can see here that Mao’s connection with classical Chinese philosophy is well noted in Western scholarship. Holubnychy went further to say, “It is most probable that Mao’s anti-idealistic and anti-doctrinaire epistemology stems from his innate, and to that effect typically Chinese, relativistic and dialectical ontology (24). Another scholar, Robert Scalapino (1982), appears to echo the assessment, but with more certainty, as he asserts that “despite his early contacts with Western ideas, [Mao] was always deeply influenced by the humanist, classical tradition from whence he came” (30).

It has been vastly established in Chinese scholarship that Mao’s thought has its native roots in traditional Chinese philosophy, as seen in the numerous articles and monographs published on the subject, especially in recent years. For instance, in July 2014, Xu Quanxing (许全兴), a professor from the Central Party’s Institute of the CPC, proposed a “dual origin” theory in an article published on *Guangming Daily* regarding the development of Chinese Marxism, namely, that Chinese Marxism undoubtedly owes its theoretical basis to the “Western ancestry” as in Marx and Lenin, but it also has its own undeniable “indigenous ancestry” within the Chinese cultural tradition. He pointed out that some of Mao’s thoughts can be traced back “directly” to the Chinese tradition rather than to the Marxist tradition. In the article, Xu also cited Mao’s criticism—back in 1941—directed towards “many Marxist-Leninist scholars” within the Party who could only talk about “Greece,” could only memorize “proverbs” of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, but could not remember at all their own “Chinese ancestors.” I am particularly mentioning Mao’s criticism here because it appears to confirm, albeit indirectly, that Mao was then very conscious about seeking inspirations from within traditional Chinese thought to tackle practical problems not addressed or even foreseen by the “Marxist ancestors” in the West.

<sup>6</sup> See *Dao De Jing*, for example, in chapter 22: “Yield and overcome; bend and be straight; empty and be full; wear out and be new; have little and gain; have much and be confused” (曲则全, 枉则直, 窪则盈, 敝而新, 少则多, 多则惑). Also, in chapter 58: “Happiness is rooted in misery, misery lurks beneath happiness” (祸兮福之所倚, 福兮祸之所伏), which is quoted by Mao in his “Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People.”

<sup>7</sup> Holubnychy is not alone; many Western scholars share his view, for example, Franz Michael, the author of *Mao and the Perpetual Revolution*.

To save space, I will mention no further other Chinese publications on Mao's "Chinese" roots; however, I feel it necessary to make a note about a trend in Chinese scholarship. That is, no matter how closely Mao's thoughts are related to traditional Chinese philosophy, they are invariably categorized under the rubric of "Chinese Marxism," as seen, for example, in the above mentioned article by Xu. Specifically, it is claimed that Mao Zedong Thought, as is officially termed in China and elsewhere, results directly from a combination of Marxist theory with Chinese practice. The widely received explanation is: Marxism, as an "import" from the West, did not quite fit into the Chinese condition then and there, but it was Mao who successfully applied the universal Marxist principles in concrete Chinese practices and creatively developed Marxism by integrating it with thoughts of the Chinese tradition, hence Mao Zedong Thought.

However, questions still remain: If Mao Zedong Thought has been developed within the framework of Marxism, how can we explain (at least) some of its features that appear directly at odds with Marxism, which is after all a Eurocentric doctrine theorizing about a post-industrial revolution in Europe presumably to be fulfilled by the urban proletariat? what is universal of Marxism if its seeds did not fit into the Chinese soil in the first place? and what exactly did Mao do to make it fit? The list of questions could go on. I think that the best way to answer these questions might be in asking a different question from a different angle: that is, is it possible that Mao's thoughts actually represent a theoretical divergence or deviation from Marxism? Mao succeeded because of the "Chinese-ness" in his thought, many would agree, but what is exactly in this very "Chinese-ness" that made him succeed? The premodern "belief system," as suggested by Schram and Schwartz (Iguchi 2010)? Or, those postmodern elements inherent in ancient Chinese thinking, as discussed, though quite briefly, in the previous section?

I will argue, in another paper, that it is those "postmodern" elements in Mao that distinguish his thoughts from those of orthodox Marxism, the latter being pretty much formulated, and developed, within the modernist mode of thinking. For now I just want to say that instead of developing Marxism, as traditionally held by Chinese scholars (in mainland China), Mao actually walked around or even broke away from it, at least on some major issues in philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. POSTMODERNISM IN MAO: A CLOSER LOOK

Then what are those postmodernist elements in ancient Chinese philosophy that are also identifiable in Mao's? To do a comprehensive study would be an impossible task for this paper, but we can still take a look at some of the basic concepts in both Mao and the system of

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<sup>8</sup> One can also argue that there are many Marxisms. In this sense, then, Mao's system of thoughts is a Marxism different from the orthodox or traditional Marxism.



classical Chinese philosophy just to have the gist. In the following, I will discuss, albeit still briefly, three basic concepts and related issues, as relevant to the topic of this paper.

#### 4.1. The Concept of Change

The first coming to mind is the notion of “change,” as elaborated at full length through the depictions of sixty-four sets of hexagrams in the *Yi-Jing* (the *Book of Changes*), of which Mao is known to have possessed a profound level of knowledge. The *Yi-Jing*, believed to “[provide] access to the deepest recesses of the ‘Chinese mind’ and [embody] the very essence of Chinese culture” (Schwartz 1985: 390), describes change as the ultimate reality of the universe driven by constant interactions between two basic forces of opposites: *yin* and *yang*. This philosophy of change differs fundamentally from traditional Western philosophy, as the latter is defined by a seemingly never-ending search for a timeless essence of “being” supposedly underlying change or becoming, as seen typically in Plato’s idealism.

It’s probably unnecessary to point out the obvious here: that Mao is a master philosopher on change. His statement that “the movement of change in the world of objective reality is never ending” (*Collected Writings* 37), and, of course, many similar ones, would certainly remind us of the philosophy of the *Yi-Jing*; his argument against metaphysics, his theories on contradiction and practice, his emphasis on perpetual revolution and struggle, his vision of personal transformation, his insistence that a particle is to be infinitely divided, etc., are all reflective of a deep belief, and conviction, in the philosophy of change. So, it should be no surprise that Mao (1964) even predicted the death of Marxism: “Marxism also has its birth, its development and its death. This may seem to be absurd. But since Marx said that all things which happen have their death, how can we say that this is not applicable to Marxism itself? To say that it won’t die is metaphysics. Naturally, the death of Marxism means that something higher than Marxism will come to replace it” (“Talk on Sakata’s Article”).

But does Marxism also speak about change and, in its extreme, revolution? Of course, it does. However, Marxism places far more emphasis on “economic determinism” (Koller 1974: 47), also understood to be historical materialism, meaning that the economic development of society is the primary driving force for historical change. In other words, Marxism presupposes some sort of materialistic “essence” as a metaphysical foundation for change, whereas Mao, and his Chinese predecessors as well, takes change per se as an eternity, free of any sort of foundation.

Then, why the difference? I think Graham explains it quite well, “Chinese thinking is in terms of process rather than of static entities” (1992: 77). Change is to process what essence is to a static entity, the latter pointing to a metaphysical force independent of myriads of changes, which is the objective force of materiality in Marxist terms. But within the process (or correlative) mode of thinking, “there is no One behind the many; there are, rather, many ones” (Hall and Ames 1998: 40). Clearly, the difference is also the one between modernism and postmodernism, with the former insisting on the absolute or the universal, assuming an all-encompassing essence as the foundation of knowledge and reality and the latter countering such

a foundational approach, arguing instead for understanding knowledge and reality as merely socially constructed—relative, situated, and, above all, subject to the laws of change. Once again, we can see that Chinese thinking, generally characterized by its correlative methods, is in alignment with postmodernism.

Many may immediately point out the concept of the Dao (Way) as a metaphysical force in early Chinese philosophy. For example, in *Dao De Jing*, the “nameless” Dao is described as “the beginning of heaven and earth” (*Tao Te Ching* 1). Laozi also states: “The Tao begot one, one begot two, two begot three, and thee begot the ten thousand things” (42). So, clearly, the Dao is the absolute, the essential One behind the many in Chinese thought. However, classical Chinese philosophy, as many Western scholars have rightly observed, is very much a practical philosophy. Unlike their Greek counterparts, who were so possessed with rational demonstration in their quest for the absolute truth, supposedly independent of human intervention, ancient Chinese thinkers (at least the vast majority of them) appeared to take a “let-it-go” attitude toward the absolute, so that they could redirect their energy to using what had already been accepted as true, like the Dao, to promote their moral or political agendas, as seen, for example, in Confucius’ teachings. Graham (1989) sums it up well: for Confucius and Laozi, “problem-solving without useful purpose is a pointless frivolity” (7).

The Dao is considered beyond reach in early Chinese thought in that it cannot be “seen,” “heard,” “held” or even “imagined” (*Tao Te Ching* 14) beside being “nameless.” If we compare it with the transcendental truth framed in the Platonic fashion, we may see the immediate difference: Plato believes that absolute truth, the One, can be accessible to humans if a rigorous reasoning, modeled after his dialectic,<sup>9</sup> is conducted. It is known that Western philosophy, since Plato, has been driven by what Derrida (1976) calls “logocentrism” (11), phrased after the Greek term *logos* (i.e., logic, reason, language, etc.), but what has been celebrated in the logocentric tradition is indeed Plato’s idealistic notion that absolute truth can somehow be reached by humans. The ancient Chinese, on the other hand, were much more pragmatic: Instead of finding out what the Dao is, they basically left it alone and focused their attention on the vicissitudes of this mundane world; instead of generalizing about the universe using a metanarrative, they chose to deal with the problematics of “ten thousand things” (*wanwu*; 万物), or the particulars of an ever-changing universe. Obviously, this pragmatic tradition has its imprints in Mao, known in philosophy for his “insistence on the primacy of particularity and unevenness of contradiction” (Liu 1997: 243).

## 4. 2. The Concept of Dialectic

Chinese dialectics is another concept that takes a predominant spot in Mao’s philosophy. Twinned with the principle of change, the notion of dialectics in Chinese thought is typically formulated as a *yin-yang* dynamic where two opposites constantly compete with and complement one another, projecting both tension and harmony. (So, *yin-yang* can also be seen

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<sup>9</sup> Plato’s dialectic is just another term for philosophy.

as a metaphor for “unity of opposites.”) Mao showed his indebtedness to early Chinese thought when he talked about “metaphysics” and “dialectics” in his speech at a plenary session of the Central Committee of the CPC:

The doctrine that everything has only one aspect has existed ever since ancient times, and so has the doctrine that everything has two aspects. They are known as metaphysics and dialectics respectively. An ancient Chinese said: “The *yin* and the *yang* make up the *Tao*.” It is impossible to have only the *yin* without the *yang*, or vice versa. This was a doctrine in ancient times affirming two aspects. Metaphysics is a doctrine affirming only one aspect. And it still persists among a considerable number of comrades. (*Selected Works* vol. 5, 340)

Here, one can see, Mao not only talked about dialectics as having “two aspects” (*yin* and *yang*) but also mentioned that one aspect complements the other. In his words, “It is impossible to have only the *yin* without the *yang*, or vice versa.” This is where Mao’s theory of dialectic differs from that of Marxism, as widely noted in Western scholarship. Koller (1974), for example, summarizes the difference as such: “Maoist thought takes opposites to be complementary; both are required for the unity of the whole. Marxist thought takes opposites to be exclusive; contradictions have to be overcome by eliminating one or both of the opposites as the process moves on to a new synthesis” (47-8).

But, again, why the difference? A feasible explanation I can think of is: Mao’s dialectic is built on the correlative style of thinking in Chinese tradition, which emphasizes “complementary polarities” instead of “conflicting opposites” as in Western analytical thinking, something I have discussed in the first section of the paper. It is true that Mao uses words like “mutually exclusive” and “absolute” and directly cites Marx, Engels, and Lenin; however, as Francis Sooss (1981) reveals in his *Mao Tse-tung’s Theory of Dialectic*, Mao’s dialectic, especially his expositions on contradiction, appears close to the Marxist dialectic in terminology but, by comparison, closer to the traditional Chinese in content.

Mao’s dialectic resonates with postmodernism because of its underlying relativity or, as Sooss would call it, “relationality” (93) closely associated with the notion of “complementarity of opposites.”<sup>10</sup> That is, things are relative precisely because they are in relation to their opposites: *yang* to *yin*, life to death, right to wrong, success to failure, absolute to relative, etc. Mao makes this clear when he says, “the unity of opposites is conditional, temporary and relative” (*Collected Writings* 90). Nonetheless, the statement is followed immediately by a one that appears to contradict the author: “the struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute.” Mao then goes on: “We may add that the struggle between opposites permeates a process from beginning to end and makes one process transform itself into another, that it is ubiquitous, and

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<sup>10</sup> Relativity in Mao’s dialectic is more than complementarity of opposites. Due to the limits of space, I won’t go further to explore it. For the purpose of the paper, I just want to point out its resonance with postmodernism, as both are celebrating relativity.

that the struggle is therefore unconditional and absolute” (91). But does this mean Mao also affirms the absolute in his theory of dialectic? I tend to say no. A closer look at Mao’s dialectic would tell of affirming “absoluteness” of relativity rather than absoluteness of the absolute in the true sense.

First of all what is absolute in Mao’s theory of dialectic has absolutely nothing to do with a metaphysical essence or the ultimate being, therefore short of absoluteness in the true sense of the word. Secondly, within Mao’s dialectic, the absolute does not stand by itself but rather exists in relation to the very relative. For that reason the absolute has to be relative in the ultimate sense. As Soos points out, relativity and absoluteness are not mutually exclusive but “complementary” in Mao’s dialectic, where both are treated as “constitutive aspects of contradiction in its existential conditionality” (122). Lastly, the struggle of opposites embodies constant change/transformation; to say the struggle of opposites is absolute is just another way of saying that change is absolute. But, metaphysically (let us assume here metaphysics exists), change or the process of change can only be seen as a non-being as opposed to being; therefore, by definition it must be relative after all. And so must the struggle of opposites.

Given Mao’s polemics against metaphysics, we could infer that Mao is using the word “absolute” to mean that the struggle of opposites is an endless process happening everywhere,<sup>11</sup> but in doing so he is also affirming “absoluteness” of relativity—or no absoluteness—inherent within the dynamic of his model of dialectic. Apparently, Mao is affirming a paradox, similar to Zhuangzi’s “truth of no truth” (Loy 1996: 51–67), as the relative can never be absolute, or vice versa. But Mao’s paradox, which I consider to be fundamentally dialectical, betrays a sort of “Chinese-ness” in it, as it brings to mind a paradoxical tradition of “speaking the unspeakable” in classical Chinese philosophy, as seen in the writings of Laozi and Zhuangzi, and many other thinkers. For instance, despite his claim that the Dao is nameless and ineffable, Laozi still names it (as “Dao”) and talks about it. In fact, the whole *Da De Jing* is centering on the Dao. Needless to say, Laozi is speaking of the unspeakable, the infinite, or the absolute by relying on “spinning” the speakable, the finite, and the relative—language. But using the relative to speak of the absolute may prove just the opposite: either the absolute does not exist, or it is just another relative. I feel the same is true of “the struggle of opposites”: It is just another relative in Mao’s dialectic.

### 4. 3. The Concept of Relativism

Relativism appears to be the natural sequel of the above discussion on Chinese dialectic, especially after we discussed the relationship between the absolute and the relative with respect to the unity/struggle of opposites in Mao’s theory of dialectic. As a matter of fact, I would go

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<sup>11</sup> There could have been a political reason. When writing “On Contradiction,” Mao might have felt the need to be in line with Marxism at least in terminology, given the heavy ideological influence from the Soviet Union under Stalin at the time. We could sense the influence indirectly from Mao’s fierce fight against dogmatism within the Party.

further to say that in early Chinese philosophy dialectic implies relativism, as seen, for example, in a statement from the *Zhuangzi*: “The sun at noon is the sun setting. The thing born is the thing dying (日方中方睨, 物方生方死)” (*Zhuang Tzu* 33; 庄子: 天下第三十三).

In some way relativism is identical with postmodernism because both are rejecting the notion of a foundational truth, absolute and *a priori*, and insisting on the relative aspect of a truth for the reason that reality is always subject to human interpretations and representations, which are constrained by a variety of factors, such as individual, social, cultural, historical, political, etc. Relativism is an important feature of classical Chinese philosophy (with perhaps the exception of the Mohist school). We can feel the relativistic overtone right from the beginning of *Dao De Jing*, which reads, “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name”<sup>12</sup> (*Tao Te Ching* 1). Laozi is apparently saying that humans cannot talk about the absolute. Or, as I understand it, the Dao as perceived by humans or phrased in human language is no longer the eternal. The absolute thus turns into the relative in the end. Here, Laozi recognizes, it would seem, two kinds of human limitations: One is that of human subjectivity in perceiving the absolute; the other is that of human language in describing the eternal. While Laozi acknowledges the absolute (i.e., the Dao), he also understands it to be “nameless,” beyond language representation, as seen in the next line: “The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.” Thus, the opposite of the nameless, the “named” or human language representation, has to be relative despite being recognized as “the mother of ten thousand things.”

The notion of *ming-shi* (name and actuality) discussed in the previous section also sheds light on the relativistic bent of classical Chinese thought for two obvious reasons. One is that Chinese *ming-shi* theories do not presuppose actualities as “universals,” independent of naming (Makeham 1994: 9). The other is that the correlation between *ming* and *shi* is indeed a dialectical unity of opposites: One exists exactly because of the other. Names and actualities, points out Makeham, “function as two parts of a whole where each partner relies on the other to such an extent that, without names, actualities would not become manifest, and without actualities, there would be nothing to be manifested as names” (145). Thus, actuality or reality, as represented through the medium of language, is ultimately a relative entity to the Chinese mind.

*Ming* and *shi* can be translated into signifier and signified in Western terms. Derrida’s deconstruction theory posits that there is no such thing as a metaphysical “presence” (similar to Chinese “object” or “actuality”) existing independently of language representation: The signified is always already embedded in the signifier, to the extent that “how we see the world depends on the language we inherit” (Berkson 1996: 105). Readers may have seen a strikingly similar view held by Zhuangzi: “Things are so because they are called so. What makes them so? Making them so makes them so. What makes them not so? Making them not so makes them not

<sup>12</sup> In Chinese: 道可道, 非常道。名可名, 非常名。无名天地之始, 有名万物之母。

so” (*Chuang Tzu* 40).<sup>13</sup> So, epistemologically, humans are trapped in the “prison-house” of language. On the other hand, Zhuangzi, and Derrida as well, also shows an extreme distrust in language in conveying reality, calling it “the guest of actuality”<sup>14</sup> in the sense that *ming* is merely relative to *shi*. And because of the relativistic nature of language, Zhuangzi and Derrida both express strong doubts about “the ability of language to present reality objectively” (Berkson 98). Due to spatial limits, I will not elaborate further on the deconstructive “spirit” of Zhuangzi and Derrida and draw their similarities, but I would like to point out that Zhuangzi’s relativism also carries a strong “dose” of perspectivism as seen in the following excerpt from his *Qiwu Lun* (齐物论):

Suppose I try saying something. What way do I have of knowing that if I say I know something I don't really not know it? Or what way do I have of knowing that if I say I don't know something I don't really in fact know it? [...] Men claim that Mao-ch'iang and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream, if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break into a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world? The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong are all hopelessly snarled and jumbled. How could I know anything about such discriminations? (*Chuang Tzu* 45-6)<sup>15</sup>

Similar statements are many in the *Zhuangzi*. For example, in *Tianxia* (天下篇), Zhuangzi talks about the relative value of various skills and schools: “the world too often seizes upon one of its aspects, examines it, and pronounces it good. But it is like the case of the ear, the eye, the nose, and the mouth: each has its own kind of understanding, but their functions are not interchangeable. In the same way, the various skills of the hundred schools all have their strong points, and at times each may be of use. But none is wholly sufficient, none is universal” (*Chuang Tzu* 364).<sup>16</sup> So, for Zhuangzi, humans are trapped not only in the prison house of language but also in their own individual perspective, narrow and provincial, like a frog trapped in a well hence unable to comprehend the ocean. Apparently, Mao was drawing on Zhuangzi’s “well-frog” metaphor in his criticism of those who failed to appreciate the positive side of the situation after the Chinese Red Army had completed the Long March, though with a tremendous loss (see “On Tactics against Japanese Imperialism,” *Selected Works* vol. 1, 149).

<sup>13</sup> In Chinese: “物谓之而然. 恶乎然? 然于然. 恶乎不然? 不然于不然” (庄子: 齐物论).

<sup>14</sup> In Chinese: “名者, 实之宾也” (庄子: 逍遥游).

<sup>15</sup> In Chinese: “尝试言之: 庸詎知吾所谓知之非不知邪? 庸詎知吾所谓不知之非知邪?.....毛嫱丽姬, 人之所美也; 鱼见之深入, 鸟见之高飞, 麋鹿见之决骤, 四者孰知天下之正色哉? 自我观之, 仁义之端, 是非之涂, 樊然淆乱, 吾恶能知其辩!”

<sup>16</sup> In Chinese: “天下多得一察焉以自好. 譬如耳目鼻口, 皆有所明, 不能相通. 犹百家众技也, 皆有所长, 时有所用. 虽然, 不该不遍, 一曲之师也.”

Like Zhuangzi, Mao is well aware of epistemological hurdles of perspectivism in humans' path of comprehending the whole picture of the world.

Then is Mao a relativist? My answer would be yes and no despite the fact that Zhuangzi's influence on Mao is well documented in scholarship.<sup>17</sup>

Mao, as we all know, is vehemently against metaphysics; thus, philosophically speaking, he can be identified as a relativist. And his repeated insistence that truth has to be tested through practice should also give us a clue about him as being a relativist, at least epistemologically. Mao once said to the effect that philosophy is all about epistemology.<sup>18</sup> So, it is safe to assume that he is a relativist in the philosophical sense. However, Mao also declares on numerous occasions that Marxist-Leninist theories are of the universal truth and therefore can be applied everywhere. Plus, Mao's emphasis on obtaining "objective knowledge" about the world would contradict him, squarely, against those postmodern relativists who insist on the impossibility of obtaining such knowledge. Then, how do we reconcile Mao's "incongruities"?

First of all, Mao is a man of *praxis*, who has been following the pragmatic tradition of Chinese philosophy, which, to quote Sooss, is "primarily oriented towards 'this-world'" (78). It would seem that Mao talks about the "universality" of Marxism mainly for tactical reasons, not for philosophical reasons. Marxist ideology had long been institutionalized within the Party before and even after Mao established his leadership, so it would have been impractical, and also unnecessary, for Mao to speak in public against the "universal applicability" of Marxism, especially if we take into account the political influence of the Soviet Union during the Chinese Revolution. Plus, as a man of *praxis*, Mao could utilize the "universal" banner of Marxism to his advantage, for example, as a source of ethos (authority) to promote his own theory and agenda. Holubnychy makes this point very clear: "Marxism as theory [...] has merely a utility value to Mao, and is not an *a priori* good thing in itself" (22).

Second, the notion of *praxis* also separates Mao from those "consistent" relativists. The latter, point out Hall and Ames, would claim that "nothing *practically* follows [their] relativism but inaction," due to a conviction that there is "no satisfactory means" of getting to know things as they are (70–71). Hence, no action for them. However, "if one tacitly or explicitly commits to one of a number of ways of acting, relativism has been *practically* abandoned," argue Hall and Ames" (71). In this sense, Mao should be categorized as a non-relativist as he is above all a man of action, wholeheartedly committed to the Chinese revolution. According to Hall and Ames, in Western philosophy, the issue of relativism is "mainly a red herring," for "most individuals who espouse relativism at the level of theory, abandon it when practical

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Lu Zhidan's *Mao on Chinese Classics* (卢志丹:《毛泽东品国学》北京:新世界出版社, 2009年).

<sup>18</sup> See Mao's conversation with Zhou Peiyuan (周培源) and Yu Guangyuan (于光远) dated Aug. 24, 1964 (from *The People's Daily*, Sept. 10, 1978).

commitment is called for” (*ibid.*). I think their assessment also holds true of Mao, who is a relativist philosophically but a non-relativist in terms of action and practice.

But meaningful action for Mao hinges on understanding the particulars of each and every concrete situation or context, hence his persistent emphasis on obtaining objective knowledge “on the basis of practice” (*Collected Writings* 31). While Mao rejects the idea of “universal truth,” he does embrace small or relative truths, which he defines as “knowledge of a particular process at any given stage of development” (37). So, objective knowledge is nothing metaphysical for Mao, as it is grounded in and obtained through the concreteness of human practices. Without such knowledge, Mao would have never turned the Chinese revolution into a success story. It is worth observing that Mao does declare, following Lenin, that “the sum total of innumerable relative truths constitutes the absolute truth” (*ibid.*). The question is, Can we humans reach that “sum total” in our own finitude of experience? Mao implicitly says no, if we read his essay “On Practice” closely, and between the lines. That is why the themes of the essay are predominantly those of the endless process of practice and the endless movement of knowledge, as perpetuated by the ever-changing human conditions. This implies that objective knowledge can never be completed.

To conclude, in this section, I have discussed some of Mao’s thoughts in light of classical Chinese philosophy with a view to postmodernism. In particular, I have explored three important concepts that can be found in common between Mao’s thoughts and early Chinese philosophy, namely, those of change, dialectic, and relativism, which naturally constitute a triad, each in it being interconnected with, and implied by, the other. Apparently, what is presupposed in the triad is a non-recognition of the absolute or universal, something characteristic of modernist philosophy in its attempt to seek an all-inclusive metanarrative to describe and explain the world. Because of such a non-recognition, Mao is able to assert “Chinese-ness” in his theory and practice, breaking away from the restraints of orthodox Marxism. Lyotard (1984) says, “I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv). If his definition holds true, we can definitely regard Mao as a “postmodernist,” or at least sort of, as Mao has persistently exercised his “incredulity” towards Marxism as a political-economic-philosophical metanarrative, something I will be discussing in another paper.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper is by no means conclusive, and I have no intention to make claims to finality. Rather, my purpose is to join the already existing conversations about Mao’s thoughts and his contributions to what is now popularly called Chinese Marxism. Since I have long been exposed to Western scholarship both on Mao and postmodernism, I feel it necessary to introduce to my Chinese and Western readers a perspective rarely discussed in the past: i.e., Mao’s affinity to postmodernism. I do not wish to say that Mao is a complete postmodernist; however, by exploring some of the postmodern elements in Mao’s thoughts, we may be able to



better appreciate his unique role in developing Chinese Marxism, assuming the term carries a great deal of distinction from orthodox Marxism in the West.

Before concluding the paper, I think it worth mentioning the difference between Western and Chinese scholars in naming the body of Mao's thoughts and theories: In China, "Mao Zedong Thought" is the norm, in both official and scholarly documents, whereas in the West the term "Maoism" is widely used to categorize Mao's thoughts with a recognition that they are "creative, distinctive developments of Marxism-Leninism" (Lutze 2013: 481). We can see that under Chinese scholarship, Mao Zedong Thought is seen as part of Marxism, and as such it is subject to the conceptual framework of the latter. However, under Western scholarship, Maoism is used to refer to an independent system of thoughts, with its own theoretical formulations. Personally, I feel Maoism is a more appropriate term because it depicts a clear distinction between Mao's thoughts and those of Marx or Lenin.

To me, such a distinction is not just that in degree but that in kind, as Marxism is essentially Eurocentric, developed along the line of modernist thinking whereas Maoism is very much Chinese-oriented, developed, at least for a substantial portion of it, along the line of postmodernist thinking. On a later occasion, I will discuss how such a development was possible given the context of Chinese Revolution and analyze some of Mao's major writings, like "On Practice" and "On Contradiction," to demonstrate differences between Mao's thoughts and those of Marx and Lenin.

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